

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 002135

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SUBJECT: BURMA: DEMARCHE ON UPCOMING ASEAN FM MEETING IN BALI

REF: STATE 56185

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) In a meeting with MFA's East Asian Affairs Director for Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Brunei Mr. Damrong Kriakruan on April 12, Poloff delivered reftel demarche and asked for RTG views. Damrong noted that ASEAN's credibility is on the line, but the RTG still believes that engagement is the best option for ASEAN. He said that the Bali meeting is a "retreat" and that, as such, no formal public statements are anticipated. However, he acknowledged that the ministers are likely to face questions from the media on Burma and it will be up to each country to decide how to respond. The RTG feels that it would not help matters to "bombard" Burma with public criticism, but it should be made clear that ASEAN will continue its efforts and will look for ways to achieve substantive progress toward democratization in Burma.

¶2. (C) Damrong said that Burma is a fixed agenda item for the Bali meeting. The ministers will receive a report from Malaysian FM Hamid which the RTG expects will be negative based on information that they have received from Malaysia. After Hamid's report, the ministers will focus on next steps. The RTG is looking for a way to "institutionalize" ASEAN's engagement efforts to move Burma toward democratization. Damrong said that one proposal that Thailand is carefully considering introducing is the creation of a forum for "regular, informal" meetings to discuss democratization. The forum would be "informal" (i.e. not an international conference with public statements, etc.) to encourage open discussion. It would meet regularly in an effort to ensure substantive progress on issues. Damrong said that such a group might include non-ASEAN members as well, including, perhaps, countries from outside the region. In discussing this option, Damrong emphasized that the RTG has not yet decided to introduce the idea. Nevertheless, the RTG is concerned that "the so-called engagement of ASEAN (with Burma) be credible, respectable and with substance."

¶3. (C) In response to Poloff's comment that the RTG policy of engagement with the regime in Burma has shown no success in advancing the democratization process, Damrong admitted that the RTG is "exhausted and tired" of the regime's behavior and of their failure to "inform their friends of what they are doing." He said that since December, the RTG and others are "making life harder for the Burmese." He said that Burma used to come to ASEAN only when it needed help in dealing with international pressure from the US, the EU, etc. Now, according to Damrong, the RTG and the other ASEAN members are making it clear to the regime that such support will not be automatic and will only come after high-level consultations at policy levels between the regime and the ASEAN governments. Damrong said that he believes the Burmese government senses the "psychological pressure" from ASEAN. He concluded by saying that the RTG wants the Burmese to understand that "life without friends is very hard."

BOYCE